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Published in:
Pólemos

DOI:
[10.1515/pol-2013-0010](https://doi.org/10.1515/pol-2013-0010)

[Link to publication](#)

Citation for published version (APA):

Baldissone, R., & de Wilde, M. (2013). Modifying the Past: Nietzschean Approaches to History. *Pólemos*, 7(2), 175-205. <https://doi.org/10.1515/pol-2013-0010>

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Riccardo Baldissone and Marc de Wilde

Modifying the Past: Nietzschean Approaches to History

Abstract: In the course of the nineteenth century, the new scientific approach to history turned the past into a passive object of knowledge. This approach betrayed a strategy of domination, as it endowed certain interpretations of history with an aura of objectivity, while delegitimizing others as myth. On the contrary, Nietzsche asserted the formative powers of the present, and he argued that the historian had to actively re-create the past and turn it into a meaningful historical narrative. In his view, the meaning of the past depended on the will to transform the present itself. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, other theorists and writers, such as Croce, Péguy, and later Borges, attempted to reconceptualise the relation between the past and the present. Similarly to Nietzsche, they claimed that historians actively re-create and modify the past. This claim was also shared by Benjamin and Foucault, who emphasized the historians' duty to modify the past by seeking to revive subjugated historical knowledges. The aim of this article is to connect the writings of all these authors in a constellation that points to a shared conviction: that history is not objectively given, but constantly re-created and modified in the present.

Keywords: Nietzsche, Foucault, Benjamin, history, genealogy

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1 Introduction

Before history was turned into a “scientific” discipline, it was considered a literary genre. Belonging to the art of rhetoric, it consisted of edifying tales and historical *exempla* that were believed to have a practical relevance to the present. Of course, ever since Thucydides had emphasized the difference between myth and truth, historians were committed to telling a truthful story about the past. But their concept of truth was literary and practical, rather than theoretical: for them, truth consisted of practical wisdom, insights that were to guide the present, offering models to their audience. Hence, the historian’s task was to narrate a story about the past that was truthful and, for that very reason, useful and meaningful.

This changed in the nineteenth century, as history was professionalized and concentrated at the universities. Central to this process of professionalization was the belief that history was not primarily a practical or literary discipline, but a “science” dealing with objective facts.¹ Indeed, the very notion of historical truth was redefined: it no longer referred to timeless truths that were illustrated by the past, but consisted of the correspondence of the historian’s knowledge to an objective reality, which, as Leopold von Ranke famously put it, showed the past “as it had actually occurred.”² This new, “scientific” approach to the past contributed to history’s separation from literature, a development that would gradually obscure the formative and creative process of historical writing, even if this divorce was never fully realized.³

However, from the end of the nineteenth century onwards, the new “scientific” approach to history was criticized sharply by Nietzsche. Turning against history’s separation from literature, Nietzsche argued that a historical discipline that focused on objective facts was not only irrelevant, but meaningless, as it was no longer tied to life. Instead of regarding history as a science, it had to be restored to its previous literary status: the historian’s task was to actively *recreate* the past, giving it meaning in light of present, and even future, needs. Indeed, Nietzsche turned against the very belief in objective knowledge itself. This belief was not merely naïve, as no historical knowledge could exist independently of the histo-

1 George G. Iggers, *Historiography in the Twentieth Century: From Scientific Objectivity to the Postmodern Challenge* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 1–2. See also Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob, *Telling the Truth about History* (New York and London: Norton, 1994), 52–76.

2 Leopold von Ranke, “Preface: Histories of the Latin and Germanic Nations from 1494–1514” in *The Varieties of History: From Voltaire to the Present*, ed. Fritz Stern (New York: Meridian Books, 1956), 57.

3 Iggers, *Historiography*, 2, 8.

rian's subjectivity, but a vicious falsehood – the claim to objective knowledge was a means of exerting domination over others by prioritizing a certain interpretation of historical events, and giving it a false appearance of neutrality and necessity.

Following in Nietzsche's wake, other authors criticized the way in which "scientific" history had apparently forgotten its origins in the present, and obscured the historian's creative activity. Even before World War I had revealed the dark sides of scientific progress, a constellation of ideas began to emerge among such diverse writers as Péguy, Croce and, later on, Eliot and Borges, pointing to a shared conviction: that history is not passively recorded, but actively made. Central to this constellation was the belief that the past is continuously recreated in the present, indeed, that the historian has the ability – and responsibility – to *modify* the past. Similar ideas were expressed by Benjamin, who believed that the past became meaningful only in relation to a particular present, in which it could suddenly acquire a new life and significance. During the long sixties,⁴ Foucault returned to Nietzsche's genealogy to capture the more productive aspects of historical writing in relation to existing practices of domination and identity formation. Like his predecessors, he attempted to re-imagine the past in a way that defeated scientific history's claims to objectivity and necessity, offering a more open and disruptive account of the past instead.

In this paper we will try to articulate the constellation of ideas about history that emerges from the works of the authors mentioned above. In doing so, our aim is to show how from the beginning of modern scientific history there has been a strong counter-tradition that criticized its claims to objective knowledge, and, instead, focused on the historian's responsibility for actively recreating and modifying the past. We will begin by analyzing Nietzsche's genealogical approach and explain how it differed from traditional approaches to the past as well as modern scientific history. Secondly, we will examine how Nietzsche's approach influenced theorists and writers who attempted to rethink the relation between past and present as well as that between history and literature. Finally, we will compare Foucault's ideas about history to Benjamin's, and show that, in spite of their differences, both attempted to re-conceptualize history, approaching it as a realm, not of necessity, but of possibility.

⁴ Historians of ideas begin to define as "long sixties" the period that roughly ranges from the late fifties to the late seventies. See, for example, Arthur Marwick, "The Cultural Revolution of the Long Sixties: Voices of Reaction, Protest and Permeation," *International History Review* 27.4 (2005): 709–744.

2 The gift of conceptual genealogy: Nietzsche's radical historicism

The restitution of the past is indeed the trigger of Nietzsche's *On the Genealogy of Morals*. In the prologue to the book Nietzsche declares his motivation:

my desire was to provide [. . .] a direction leading to a true history of morality and to advise him [Paul Ree] in time against the English way of making hypotheses by starting off into the blue. For, indeed, it's obvious which colour must be a hundred times more important for a genealogist of morality than this blue: namely, gray, in other words, what has been documented, what can be established as the truth, what really took place, in short, the long and difficult-to-decipher hieroglyphic writing of the past in human morality.⁵

This odd reappearance of Ranke's history "wie es eigentlich gewesen,"⁶ ["as it actually occurred"] is more a polemical claim against the decontextualized "English way" of constructing moral philosophy, than an appeal to historical objectivity. The immediate target of Nietzsche's impatience are those "old, cold, boring frogs" who think moral concepts "essentially unhistorically, in what is now the traditional manner of philosophers."⁷ As always, Nietzsche clears the path that he is going to follow by vigorously cutting, as it were, the theoretical weeds that occlude his perspective to come. And yet, he also underlines that he is considering other genealogies of morals

not in order to prove them wrong – what have I to do with preparing refutations! – but, as is appropriate to a positive spirit, to put in the place of something unlikely something more likely and possibly in the place of some error a different error.⁸

This different error is a different hermeneutical perspective that does not hide "the *partie honteuse* [shameful part] of our inner world,"⁹ but which instead is ready to accept that "all the ideas of ancient humanity [. . .] are much more coarse, crude, superficial, narrow, blunt and, in particular, *unsymbolic*."¹⁰ Of course, such a deployment of derogatory adjectives underscores by contrast the lofty

⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals* (Mineola: Dover Publications, 2003), 1.7.

⁶ Ranke, "Preface," 57. [Our translation]. We can detect in Ranke's famous statement echoes of Thucydides, *The History of the Peloponnesian War* (1.22.4).

⁷ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 1.1.

⁸ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 1.4.

⁹ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 1.1.

¹⁰ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 1.6.

ideals of moral philosophy and their inability to give account of the historical reality.

However, it is not the will for truth that urges Nietzsche to trace, for example, the notion of purity to the simple practice of washing oneself.¹¹ We should rather see here at work Nietzsche's bold refusal to feel ashamed of himself and of his fellow humans.¹² Though such conscious anti-Lutheran stance leads Nietzsche to joyously claim also practices of violence and oppression, his unashamedness of himself and of humans in general brings him paradoxically close to Terence's classical claim of human commonality "homo sum: humani nihil a me alienum puto,"¹³ ["I am a man: I hold that nothing human is alien to me"]. This feeling of closeness to human experience in general allows Nietzsche to conceive of Platonism and Christianity as perverted strategies of repression and sublimation of human vital expressions. And this sharing in a common human belonging grounds his hermeneutic battle cry, *cherchez la pratique!*¹⁴ behind the various human ideological products.

There is a stunning likeness between Nietzsche's effort to uncover human practices behind "the hieroglyphic writing of the past," and Marx's attempt to decipher the "social hieroglyphic"¹⁵ as result of collective production. Foucault not only detected this similarity, but he also oriented his own deciphering activity towards Nietzsche's radical historicism, by refusing even the stability of historical constants. We may observe that such a refusal resonates with Nietzsche's notion of the eternal return as a chaotic condition that can be only temporarily and contingently ordered.¹⁶ And we may also detect the family resemblance of the perspectival nature of Nietzsche's temporary order with the partiality of the

¹¹ Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 1.6.

¹² Nietzsche's unashamedness resonates with Stirner's proud affirmation: "We are perfect altogether! For we are, every moment, all that we can be; and we never need be more." Max Stirner, *The Ego and Its Own*, ed. David Leopold, trans. Steven Byington (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 317.

¹³ Terence, *Heautontimoroumenos*, 1.1.25 in *Publii Terentii Comoediae Sex*, ed. Edward St. John Parry (London: Whittaker and Co., George Bell, 1857), 174. [Our translation].

¹⁴ The reference here is to the sentence *cherchez la femme*, look for the woman, which from Alexandre Dumas on became a cliché of detective fiction: no matter what the problem, a woman is the root cause.

¹⁵ Karl Marx, *Capital*, trans. Edward Aveling and Samuel Moore (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1954), 1.1.4.

¹⁶ The notion of the eternal return appears in Nietzsche's *The Gay Science* §341 under the hypothetical condition "what if?" and it should not be understood as an alternative philosophy of history, but rather as "the closest approximation of a world of becoming to a world of being," [Our translation] in *Sämtliche Werke: Kritische Studienausgabe* (KSA) (Berlin and New York/Munich: Walter de Gruyter/Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1967–1977 and 1988), 12, 7 [54]; WP

proletarian perspective. And yet, for Marx this perspective heralded the universal, as it was the legitimate synecdoche for the whole humanity.

This synecdochical substitution is the distinctive *tropos* of modernities.¹⁷ Since the seventeenth century, most modern thinkers presumed that their observations, reflections and theories would immediately apply to all their fellow humans. Though the Christian god first granted this immediate transferability, his role was slowly but relentlessly replaced by the sense of biological sameness, which compulsory education spread in the West. Nietzsche sensed and resented the populist declension of this shift, and he indicted as *ressentiment* of the masses their will to be assimilated to dominant values and powers.¹⁸ As Nietzsche read his contemporary emancipatory practices as the renewed expression of the Christian perversion, he could only direct his sense of human belonging towards the remote pre-Platonic past, and to the (*über*)humanity¹⁹ to come.

Hence, though he felt “human, all too human,” Nietzsche set out for a solitary journey, with the echoes of voices from the past as his only company. Whilst he accepted to talk only on behalf of himself as a tough necessity, he often betrayed his desire to share by appearing in the plural. However, though he would stand, for example, as “we Hyperboreans,”²⁰ he had no illusion about his fellow travelers: “perhaps not one of them is yet alive.”²¹ As Nietzsche knew he was born posthumous, he could but accept his role of ἄγγελος (*ángelos*), angel or messenger²² of the way out of nihilism. This role brought him dangerously close to Paul

§617. If everything recurs, any objective selection is ethically and epistemically impossible, and we have to take responsibility for our selecting activity.

17 See Riccardo Baldissoni “Beyond the Modern Synecdoche: Towards a Non Fundamentalist Framework for Human Rights Discourse” in *Activating Human Rights and Peace: Theories, Practices and Contexts*, eds. Rob Garbutt, Bee Chen Goh and Baden Offord (London: Ashgate Press, 2012), 45–56.

18 Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morals*, 1.10.

19 In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, Nietzsche termed as *Übermensch* the new human to come. The German preposition *über* shares with the Greek *ὑπέρ* (*hypér*) and the English *hyper* also a morphological similarity. Though the term *Übermensch* was often rendered in English as Superman, we would prefer the translation Beyond-Man, as in the first version of the book by Tille, or Overman, as in more recent English editions.

20 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, trans. Henry L. Mencken (Costa Mesa, Ca.: Noontide Press, 1980), §7.

21 Nietzsche, *The Antichrist*, Preface.

22 The Greek word ἄγγελος (*ángelos*) is the nominalised form of the verb ἀγγέλλω (*angéllō*), to announce. It was used with the general meaning of messenger, when the translators of the Bible into Greek choose it to render the Hebrew word מַלְאָכִים (*mal'ākh*), so that it came to identify god's messengers, the angels.

of Tarsus and his announcement of the coming παρουσία (*parousía*),²³ so that Nietzsche only embraced it through an act of literature, and he let his literary objective correlative Zarathustra to enact a parodic *εὐαγγήλιον* (*euangélion*), good announcement or gospel.

Sure enough, there was no revelation behind Nietzsche's predicaments. More precisely, there was neither the Stoic πρόνοια (*prónoia*) nor its Latin and Christian avatar *providentia*,²⁴ nor its secularised indicators of modern progress to be extrapolated. Hence, the signs of the (*über*)human to come that Nietzsche painstakingly accumulated did not refer to a numinous presence whatsoever, be it that of religious or historical objectivity. On the contrary, these signs acted as plastic components of an immense and boundless ordering network,²⁵ which we can still access through both Nietzsche's published works and fragments. All Nietzsche's writings witness his ongoing reconsideration of the past and its re/constructions, including his own.²⁶ Hence, his genealogical production always combines a double drift in time, that of the objects and that of the viewpoint of the ordering subject(s).²⁷

Moreover, as a philologist Nietzsche dismisses merely retrogressive views of history: "to search for beginnings you turn into a crab. The historian looks backward; in the end he also *believes* backward."²⁸ On the contrary, the Nietzschean renderings of the past are springboards to the future. Of course, his chaotic (or radically historicist) view of past occurrences set his use of history apart from the traditional understanding of *historia magistra vitae*,²⁹ history as life's teacher.

23 παρουσία (*parousía*) is a nominalised form of the verb πάρεμι (*páreimi*), to be present, and it can be translated as presence, advent or official visit.

24 We may consider the Latin word *providentia*, providence, as a conceptual recasting of the Stoic term πρόνοια (*prónoia*), forethought, especially through the work of Cicero. It first defined a Roman deity, who represented at once the emperor's care or foresight for Rome and the Romans (*Providentia Augusta*), and the providence of the gods for the emperor (*Providentia deorum*). Later on, it became the expression of the care of the Christian god for humans.

25 "Genealogy demands relentless erudition." Michel Foucault, "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History," [1971] in *Michel Foucault: Aesthetics, Method, and Epistemology*, ed. James D. Faubion (New York: The New Press, 1998), 370: further references in the text, abbreviated as *NGH*.

26 See, for example, the ruthless reconsideration of *The Origin of Tragedy in Ecce Homo*.

27 Leopardi's 23 July 1821 note in the *Zibaldone* that describes the self-historicizing ability as the distinctive tract of "sommi spiriti," the highest spirits, applies in advance to Nietzsche. See Giacomo Leopardi, *Zibaldone* (Milano: Mondadori, 1997), 1376–1377.

28 Friedrich Nietzsche, "Maxims and Arrows" in *Twilight of the Idols, or, How to Philosophize with a Hammer*, trans. and ed. Duncan Large (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), §24.

29 Cicero, *De Oratore*, 2.9.36: "Historia vero testis temporum, lux veritatis, vita memoriae, magistra vitae, nuntia vetustatis, qua voce alia nisi oratoris immortalitati commendatur?" ["History is indeed the witness of the times, the light of truth, the life of memory, the teacher of life, the

This understanding entails either an expectation for cyclical repetitions, as in the classical vision of history, or the presupposition that historical knowledge is cumulative, as in modern historicist interpretations. As Nietzsche never forgets his perspective, the ability of his genealogies to project themselves onto the future is not granted by any objective historical out-there-ness (or presence). On the contrary, Nietzsche's capacity to follow past transformations of human practices is the effect of his will to produce further transformations.³⁰ This will is enacted in Nietzsche's present, but, as it were, produces its effects in the past, as the reorganization of the whole history of the West.³¹

3 Unveiling the past: sources of historicism

The acknowledgement of the effects of the present activity of the historian upon the past challenges the whole tradition not only of modern historicism, but also of its classical sources. Since Thucydides set as his task the assessment of "the certainty of the events,"³² the role of Western historians was construed as the unveiling of the past. Moreover, Thucydides applied to history the Greek traditional structure of the cyclical alternation of natural events. Hence, unlike Herodotus, who wanted to preserve narrations about past events lest they could disappear, Thucydides reconstructed the past because he believed in its future repetition. In other words, though historical memory could fade away, he believed that the underlying historical sequence would take place anyway. As soon as it left its father,³³ history was split apart from historiography.

messenger of antiquity: by what voice other than the orator's may she be entrusted to immortality?" [Our translation].

30 The English word "power" is a veritable bottleneck through which a wide range of European concepts are forced to pass. In the case of Nietzsche, his *Wille zur Macht* would be better rendered as the will to expand one's capacity to act upon the world, rather than as will to power.

31 It may be argued that Nietzsche's re-evaluation of the West only affects its intellectual history. Nevertheless, this argument requires an unlikely space outside of intellectual history itself.

32 Thucydides wrote in *The History of the Peloponnesian War* 1.22.5: "τῶν τε γενομένων τὸ σαφές σκοπεῖν," ["τὸν τε γενομένον τὸ σαφές σκοπεῖν"] ["to investigate the certainty of the events."] [Our translation]. Following Nietzsche's understanding of words as sedimented practices, we may notice that the non-metaphorical meaning of σκοπέω (*skopéo*), to investigate, is to look from afar or above, whilst τὸ σαφές (*to saphés*), certainty, is a nominalised form of the adjective σαφής (*saphés*), limpid.

33 Cicero (*De legibus* 1.5) famously wrote "Herodotum, patrem historiae" ["Herodotus, father of history."]

Whilst the Romans accurately recorded their events, they also knew that history could be acted upon. For example, the emperor Caracalla, who included in his *Constitutio Antoniniana* all his subjects as Roman citizens, excluded his brother Geta not only from power and life but also from historical memory, by having all the material traces of his brother's existence erased, according to the practice of *damnatio memoriae*, the condemnation of memory.³⁴ Nevertheless, when Eusebius invented Christian historiography one century later,³⁵ though he turned Thucydides' historical cycle into a linear progression, he restated the absolute objectivity of history, whose ἀποκάλυψις (*apokálypsis*), unveiling or revelation became the task of Christian historians.

In the fifteenth century, the humanist Lorenzo Valla relied on the same principle of historical objectivity when he turned the dissecting power of philological tools against the text of the supposed donation of Constantine, and he exposed as a forgery the document that justified the establishment of the Papal State.³⁶ Before Valla's critical feat, and since at least the time of Hellenistic Alexandrine scholars, philological skills were deployed with the constructive task of enriching a text with additional interpretative layers. All along the middle ages, the glossators endowed documents with further *strata* of interpretation, just like the painter who "sempre pone," always adds, in the words of Leonardo.³⁷ After Valla, the dissecting powers of philological tools could also be directed against texts, which could be analysed through a subtractive critique that let emerge the hidden historical truth, just like the sculptor who "solo leva,"³⁸ removes only.

Leonardo's recasting of Alberti's descriptions of painting and sculpture was to be popularized by Freud as a metaphor of the relation between hypnosis and psychoanalysis. In his supposed quotation of Leonardo,³⁹ which includes a

34 Cassius Dio, *Historia Romana* 9.78.2.

35 Eusebius also revolutioned historical chronology by exploiting the format of the code (as opposed to the traditional roll) to list chronological information in tabular format, which enforced the synchronisation of the various parallel strands of data. See the online English translation of Eusebius' *Chronicle* at <http://rbedrosian.com/euseb.html> (July 2, 2013).

36 See Lorenzo Valla, *On the Donation of Constantine* [1440], trans. Glen Warren Bowersock (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2007).

37 See Leonardo da Vinci, *Trattato della Pittura*, 1.1.35 "Dello scultore e pittore": "perché esso scultore solo leva, ed il pittore sempre pone di varie materie," ["because the sculptor only removes, and the painter adds various materials"]. [Our translation]. Leonardo derived these characterisations from the Italian version of the short treatise *De Statua* by Leon Battista Alberti.

38 Leonardo nearly literally repeats Alberti's expression "solo con il levar via," ["by only taking away"]. [Our translation].

39 "Said Leonardo, 'the art of painting works *per via di porre*, that is to say, places little heaps of paint where they have not been before on the uncolored canvas; sculpturing, on the other hand, goes *per via di levare*, that is to say, it takes away from the stone as much as covers the surface of

curious metathesis of the original statement by Alberti,⁴⁰ Freud draws a simile between sculpture and psychoanalysis, which

does not seek to add or to introduce anything new, but to take away something, to bring out something; and to this end concerns itself with the genesis of the morbid symptoms and the psychical context of the pathogenic idea which it seeks to remove.

However, Freud's comparison stretches well beyond the fields of art and psychotherapy, as it is symptomatic⁴¹ of the more general modern approach to knowledge. Modernities constructed the subjective intervention of thinkers as a disturbing interference or, at best, a mere accident along the path to truth. Since the seventeenth century, modern thinkers were supposed to clear this path and set free the naked truth by sculpting away its surrounding incrustations, superstructures and superfetations. In Nietzsche's times, which were also the apex of positivist ideology, historians were precisely requested the same chiselling ability of scientists.

4 Rediscovering the present: "all history is contemporary history"

Nietzsche's indictment of historical objectivity was ahead of his times. And yet, just a few years later, at the beginning of the twentieth century, the whole scaffolding of modernities, to say it with Toulmin, was under scrutiny.⁴² Among the new historiographical endeavours, Spengler's ambitious depiction of the

the statue therein contained.'” Sigmund Freud, *On Psychotherapy* (1905) in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, eds. Anna Freud and James Strachey, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth, 1964), vol. 7, 260–261 (lecture delivered before the *Wiener Medizinisches Doktorenkollegium* on December 12, 1904).

40 Here is Alberti's whole sentence, which bears a clear Aristotelian flavour: “Alcuni altri incominciarono a far questo solo con il levar via, come che togliendo via quel che in detta materia è di superfluo, scolpiscono, e fanno apparir nel marmo una forma, o figura d'uomo, la quale vi era prima nascosa, ed in potenza,” [“Some others began to do this [shaping] by only taking away, so that by taking away the superfluous material, they sculpt, and they make appear in the marble a shape, or a human figure, which was hidden there before, and in potency.”] [Our translation]. Leon Battista Alberti, “Della Statua” in *Della Pittura e Della Statua* (Milano, 1804), 108.

41 We should better say “quasi-symptomatic,” as it is our reading that constructs Freud's metaphor as a symptom. See Riccardo Baldissone, “Sovereignty Forever” in this issue of *Polemos*.

42 See Stephen Toulmin, *Cosmopolis: The Hidden Agenda of Modernity* (New York: Free Press, 1990).

Western path apparently took further the Nietzschean perspective, but his grand narrative of the decline of the West risked to mirror in the reverse the *récit* of progress.⁴³ Croce's 1915 German book on the theory and the history of historiography instead decisively shifted the focus of the historian from the past to be reconstructed to the present in which the reconstructions occur.⁴⁴ This shift took the shape of a dictum that was to become famous: all history is contemporary history.⁴⁵

Shortly after Croce acknowledged the perspective of the present as organizer of the rendering of the past, Eliot claimed from within the field of literature the retroactive effect of the present upon the past. In particular, Eliot argued that "the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past."⁴⁶ Péguy gave this retroactive effect a paradoxical expression in his *Clio, Dialogue of History and the Pagan Soul*.⁴⁷ Clio, the muse of history, contends that previous occurrences in a chronological series repeat in advance the subsequent ones.⁴⁸ For example, Clio argues that the first water-lily painted by Monet repeats all the other ones. In a similar way, she maintains that "it is not Federation Day which was the first commemoration, the first anniversary of the fall of the Bastille. It is the fall of the Bastille which was the first Federation Day, a Federation in advance."⁴⁹ According to Clio, the fall of the Bastille is the *zéroième*, zeroth or

43 Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* [1918–1923], eds. Arthur Helps and Helmut Werner, trans. Charles F. Atkinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991).

44 Benedetto Croce, *Zur Theorie und Geschichte der Historiographie*, trans. Enrico Pizzo (Tubingen: Mohr, 1915).

45 "Il bisogno pratico, che è nel fondo di ogni giudizio storico, conferisce a ogni storia il carattere di 'storia contemporanea,' perché, per remoti e remotissimi che sembrano cronologicamente i fatti che vi entrano, essa è, in realtà, storia sempre riferita al bisogno e alla situazione presente, nella quale quei fatti propagano le loro vibrazioni," ["The practical requirements which underlie every historical judgment give to all history the character of 'contemporary history' because, however remote in time events there recounted seem to be, the history in reality refers to present needs and present situations wherein those events vibrate"]. [Our translation]. Benedetto Croce, *La storia come pensiero e azione* (Bari: Laterza, 1967), 5.

46 T.S. Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent" in *The Sacred Wood* (London: Methuen, 1920), 50.

47 Charles Péguy, *Clio, Dialogue de l'Histoire et de l'Âme Païenne* (Paris: Gallimard, 1932).

48 Péguy relied on Bergson's reversal of the relation between reality and possibility. Bergson conceived of possibility as a retroactive projection of real events onto the past: "le possible est l'effet combiné de la réalité une fois apparue et d'un dispositif qui la rejette en arrière," ["the possible is the combined effect of a reality once it has appeared, and of an apparatus that projects it backward"]. [Our translation]. Henri Bergson, "Le Possible et le Réel" in *La Pensée et le Mouvant* (Paris: P.U.F., 1975), 112.

49 "Ce n'est pas la Fête de la Fédération qui fut la première commémoration, le premier anniversaire de la prise de la Bastille. C'est la prise de la Bastille qui fut la première Fête de la Fédération, une Fédération avant la lettre." Péguy, *Clio*, 114. [Our translation].

zero degree commemoration of the French Republic. Péguy's anachronistic repetition is thoroughly counter-intuitive, as it appears to reverse the time flow. Nevertheless, precisely because of its evident incongruity such reversed repetition is able to remind us of our constant intervention upon the past.

In 1951, Borges put forth a more explicit version of Eliot's claim about our projective intervention onto the past: "the fact is that each writer *creates* her predecessors. Her work modifies our conception of the past, just like it is bound to modify the future."⁵⁰ Of course, this critical statement is not as shocking as the contentions of Péguy's *Clio*. The fact is that precisely the space of literary fiction allowed Péguy (just like Nietzsche through his Zarathustra) to enact another metaphysical framework via the redistribution of roles and allegiances, so that he could reverse the very structure of temporality. In other words, literary illusion, even better than any later erasure of concepts,⁵¹ provided Péguy with the condition of being at once *in ludo*,⁵² in the game of representation, and outside of it.⁵³ In Nietzschean terms, we could say that from within the literary frame Péguy described becoming (that is, our ongoing reconfiguration of ourselves as memories⁵⁴) in the language of being (the construction of occurrences as objective entities).

50 "El echo es que cada escritor crea a sus precursores. Su labor modifica nuestra concepción del pasado, como ha de modificar el futuro." [Our translation]. Jorge Luis Borges, "Kafka y Sus Precursores" in *Otras Inquisiciones: 1937–1952* (Buenos Aires: Sur, 1952).

51 We are referring here to the Heideggerean (and later Derridean) device of writing a word under erasure, in order to show the problematic nature of its definition, and of definition in general. See Martin Heidegger, *The Question of Being*, trans. and ed. Jean T. Wilde and William Kluback (Albany: New College University Press, 1958).

52 The semantic area of both the Latin words *inlusio*, illusion and *illudere*, to delude, can be etymologically related to the condition of being *in ludo*, in the game. See also Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-element in Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955).

53 In the words of Latour, *Clio* "parle de la temporalité [. . .] par des moyens tels qu'elle met en oeuvre les procédés dont elle parle," ["speaks of temporality by such means that she implements the processes of which she speaks."] [Our translation]. See Bruno Latour, "Les raisons profondes du style répétitif de Péguy," [1973] in *Péguy Ecrivain*, Colloque du Centenaire (Paris: Klincksieck, 1977), 78–102, available at <http://www.bruno-latour.fr/sites/default/files/01-PEGUY-FR.pdf> (July 2, 2013).

54 "Memory is the true name of the relation to oneself, or the affect on self by self," Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. Sean Hand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 107.

5 Narrating the past: history as fiction

If we accept Bakhtin's definition of the main aspect of the literary genre of Menippean Satire as the adventures and the testing of an idea,⁵⁵ we may well include Péguy's Clio (and Nietzsche's Zarathustra) among its main characters. Actually, in her monologue Clio subverts more than one established idea about history, and, more important, she completely ignores the rules of historical discourse, by putting forth her idiosyncratic arguments as the expression of her personal preferences as history's tutelary deity. However, as previously recalled, Clio casts her astonishing chronological reversal in the language of being that, according to Nietzsche, conceives of becoming only as "the transition from one persisting 'dead' state to another persisting 'dead' state."⁵⁶ Of course, Clio's bold inversion of the sequence of these states can hardly be overestimated. And yet, the limitation of Clio's conceptual game, and of Menippean Satire in general, lays in their very nature, which mobilizes the resources of literature to stage a theatre of ideas.

The Menippean Satire inherited this limitation from its literary predecessor, the Socratic dialogue. In the writings of Plato and Xenophon, Socrates and his interlocutors take the scene only inasmuch as they are ideologists. We may doubt whether the supposed original nature of Socratic ideas was dialogic, as surmised by the traditional interpretations, or the Socratic dismissal of all ideas' definitions surreptitiously construed these ideas' transcendence, as Nietzsche bitterly protested.⁵⁷ In any case, Socratic dialogue reduced both the tragic and the comical interplay of Greek classical theatre to a cognitive skirmish, albeit subtle. The Platonic ideological machinery turned even the erotic attraction for a bodily beauty into a lesser and incomplete instance of the attraction for the transcendent beauty of ideas.⁵⁸ In the words of Plato's mouthpiece Diotima, these are the stakes for the contemplating lover of eternal beauty: "when he has begotten a true virtue and

⁵⁵ Bakhtin stretches the definition of the Menippean Satire, an ancient literary genre inspired by the writings of Greek Cynic author Menippus of Gadara (III century BCE), in order to include medieval and also modern writers. Bakhtin enumerates various distinctive features of the genre, among which he underlines the staging of a theatre of ideas. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. William Rotsel (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Ardis, 1973).

⁵⁶ Nietzsche, KSA 9, 11 [150], 499.

⁵⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*, trans. and ed. Marianne Cowan (Chicago: Regnery Gateway, 1962).

⁵⁸ "A man finds it truly worth while to live, as he contemplates essential beauty. This, when once beheld, will outshine your gold and your vesture, your beautiful boys and striplings, whose aspect now so astounds you and makes you and many another, at the sight and constant society of your darlings, ready to do without either food or drink if that were any way possible, and only gaze upon them and have their company." (Plato, *Symposium* 211d).

has reared it up he is destined to win the friendship of Heaven; he, above all men, is immortal.”⁵⁹

Platonic ideas culminated the path that reversed the Greek traditional relation between the human condition and immortality. Whilst dead Homeric heroes simply remained on the ground where they had fallen, and only their pale shadows fled to the underworld (*Iliad* 1.3–5), in Platonic narrations the individual ψυχή (*psychē*) or soul represented the human principle of individuation, and it was conceived of as naturally aspiring to the contemplation of likewise immortal entities, the ideas. This reversal went together with the elaboration of the Greek alphabetic written language. Writing supported the shift from the traditional παιδεία (*paideia*) or education, which relied on the empathic identification with the characters of Homeric narrations, towards the construction of detached objects of knowledge.⁶⁰

Nietzsche rightly underscored the essential continuity in the history of Western thought from its Platonic, or metaphysical turn on. And yet, though “we have no language – no syntax and no lexicon – which is foreign to this history,”⁶¹ from within the fictional frame of literature such very language from time to time could be used, as it were, to undermine itself. As a notable example, we have already recalled the Menippean Satire and its various resurgences. Moreover, narrations could even transcend the limitation of the theatre of ideas, as in the polyphonic interweaving of Dostoyevsky’s novels, which kept both human characters and ideas in a permanently unfinalised condition.⁶²

In his extraordinarily fascinating stories, Borges provided us with an even more scorching treatment of ideas, which he exposed to his narrative recasting of the Aristotelian *reductio ad absurdum*, or reduction to absurdity.⁶³ Such form of argument assumes as accepted the point to be disproved, so that it can show the untenable consequences of this very assumption. The impossibility to actualize metaphysical concepts, from Platonic ideas to godly features, from Kantian regulative ideas to scientific objectivity, kept these concepts safe from any disapproval that did not accept the metaphysical game of substitution of a centre for another

⁵⁹ Plato, *Symposium*, 212a.

⁶⁰ See Eric Havelock, *Preface to Plato* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1963); *The Muse Learns to Write: Reflections on Orality and Literacy from Antiquity to the Present* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1986).

⁶¹ Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” [1966], in *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 280.

⁶² See Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*.

⁶³ The Latin definition derives from the Greek ἡ εἰς τὸ ἀδύνατον ἀπαγωγὴ (*hē eis to adunaton apagogē*), reduction to the impossible, as in Aristotle, *Prior Analytics* 29b5–6.

centre.⁶⁴ On the contrary, Borges bypassed this vicious circle by producing the *narrative* actualisation of a few core concepts of Western metaphysics, from immortality to infinity and to unlimited knowledge and memory.

Once actualised in the fictional world of the story, the metaphysical concept produces consequences that are at odd with any possible expectation grounded on experience. For example, when in “The Writing of the God”⁶⁵ the Amerindian prisoner deciphers the divine writing that gives him absolute power, he does not escape, because “he who has glimpsed the universe [. . .] can have no thought for a man, for a man’s trivial joys or calamities, though he himself be that man.”⁶⁶ Borges accumulates several vertiginous practical examples of the difficult relationship (at least in the narrative space) between human lives and actualised metaphysical ideas, which range from being unbearable, as in the case of immortality,⁶⁷ to being merely futile, as in the hilarious case of a map as big as the territory it represents.⁶⁸

6 Modifying the past: history as metamorphosis

Borges also addressed historical and chronological objectivity as an essayist, but his argument about the essential identity of apparently different moments in time is just one in an endless series of Western philosophical speculations.⁶⁹ It is instead in his narrative construction of the reciprocal grafting of historical, biographical and literary discourses that we can have a glimpse of a multilayered historiography, which would not reduce history to the mere restitution of the past. All along Western history, this reduction resulted from the metaphysical use of writing, which construed historical narrations as supplements to the various

64 “The entire story of the concept of structure [. . .] must be thought of as a series of substitutions of center for center, as a linked chain of determination of the center. Successively, and in a regulated fashion, the center receives different forms or names. The history of metaphysics, like the history of the West, is the history of these metaphors and metonymies.” Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play,” 279.

65 Jorge Luis Borges, “The Writing of the God” in *The Aleph*, trans. Andrew Hurley (New York: Penguin, 2000), 89–94.

66 Borges, “The Writing of the God,” 93–94.

67 Jorge Luis Borges, “The Immortal” in *The Aleph*, 3–19.

68 Jorge Luis Borges, “Of Exactitude in Science” in *The Aleph*, 181.

69 Jorge Luis Borges, “A New Refutation of Time” in *Other Inquisitions*, trans. Ruth L. C. Simms (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2000), 171–187.

avatars of objectivity.⁷⁰ If we could step back in time before Thucydides invented history by severing it from historiography,⁷¹ we would easily accept that historiographical practices both construct and modify history. As Benjamin neither allowed himself nor his angel of history the liberty to trace back time,⁷² he rather grounded this acceptance on the weak messianic power of the historian, who can (and should, in Benjamin's view) keep the past open.⁷³

Benjamin's renowned reading of Klee's painting *Angelus Novus* as the angel of history is a reenactment of the long-standing Western practice of ἔκφρασις (*ékphrasis*) or vivid description in words of a work of art.⁷⁴ Whilst *ékphrasis* may be likened to those hermeneutic practices that add further *strata* to their objects of inquiry, it also endows its objects with a translation into a different medium of expression. This further layer of words makes us realize that Benjamin's angel looks at history from the same position of Péguy's Clio, the muse of history. Both the angel and the muse (just like all of us) watch the past from the present. Moreover, the angel's synthetic conflation of the series of events into one single disaster is not too far from the muse's perception of the unity of the series as a repetition of its later occurrence, which is not only the latest reconfiguration of the event, but also the instance that constructs the previous ones as its predecessors.

In his *Genealogy of Morals*, Nietzsche expands each moral concept into a series of its different uses in time. Nietzsche relates this drift of uses with a parallel transformation of practices, which appropriate words and concepts by twisting

⁷⁰ See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

⁷¹ This is the famous Hegelian description of the separation, which he both rationalizes and attempts to reconcile as a synchronic emergence: "In our language the term *History* unites the objective with the subjective side, and denotes quite as much the *historia rerum gestarum*, as the *res gestae* themselves; on the other hand it comprehends not less what has *happened*, than the *narration* of what has happened. This union of the two meanings we must regard as of a higher order than mere outward accident; we must suppose historical narrations to have appeared contemporaneously with historical deeds and events. It is an internal vital principle common to both that produces them synchronously." Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. John Sibree (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1991), III §68.

⁷² Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History" in *Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938–1940* [1940], trans. Edmund Jephcott and others, eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003), thesis 9.

⁷³ Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," thesis 2.

⁷⁴ The word *ékphrasis* is first documented in Τέχνη ῥητορικῆ (*Téchne rhētorikē*), [*The Art of Rhetoric*], 10.17, which was traditionally attributed to Dionysius of Halicarnassus.

their meanings. In this way, the aristocratic good of *καλοκάγαθία*⁷⁵ (*kalokagathía*) becomes the moral good of the Christian *bonum*. However, whilst the Nietzschean genealogy focuses on the historical discontinuity of moral values, it reaches well beyond moral philosophy, as it announces the questioning of the Western metaphysical priority of ideas over practices. Intellectual habit and metaphysical nostalgia still construct this long due questioning as a nihilist loss, which in turn does not fail to produce arrays of mourners. On the contrary, we should better emphasise the positive and productive declension of the questioning of ideas, which already had extraordinary effects on Western culture.

We may well include Klee's angel among these extraordinary effects. In general, Klee's artistic activity (similarly to Picasso and Miró's) could be described as both the exploration and the testing of new languages of forms. Klee incessantly engages with a kind of systematic *bricolage*, so that on the one hand he puts to work each time a particular artistic technique as a generative structure, and on the other hand he takes on board (somewhat *post festum*) the evocative power of representation. In other words, Klee fully participates in a major process of transformation of Western art and culture, which only in the twentieth century began to approach the medium as a catalyst and a guide to artistic production, rather than just as a technical tool in the service of the actualisation of the idea. Hence, we should not consider as the basic entity of Klee's production the single work of art, but rather the series of chromatic and formal variations generated by the use of a specific technique. *Angelus Novus* is no exception, and its formal characteristics have a lot to share with several of Klee's drawings that exploit the shaping ability of lines.⁷⁶

And yet, the angel as a subject also bears for Klee a specific meaning: it embodies a transformation in progress.⁷⁷ In each wing of *Angelus Novus*, five fingers are still detectable. This is why the angel re-emerges as a subject regardless of the changes of technique, and of the progressive essentialization of Klee's pictorial sign. Both this later distillation of simple and powerful traits and the proliferation of angels (twenty nine in 1939) witness Klee's patient and courageous effort to work through his long terminal illness. We may understand these last still partly human angels as the objectivation of Klee's acceptance of his last transformation to come.

⁷⁵ The noun *kalokagathía* is a nominalisation of the couple of adjectives *καλὸς καὶ ἀγαθός* (*kalós kai agathós*), beautiful and good, by compounding and contraction.

⁷⁶ See Paul Klee, *Catalogue Raisonné* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1998).

⁷⁷ See Will Grohmann, *Paul Klee*, trans. Norbert Guterman (London: Thames and Hudson, 1967).

Klee's mutating angels follow the *tropos* of metamorphosis, with which classical authors tackled the unbridgeable gap between humans and gods. The need for a complete metamorphosis underlined the discontinuity between mortal and immortal entities, so that any compromise, from Achilles on, was a recipe for disaster. Petronius recalls in his novel *Satyricon*, which retains several elements of Menippean Satire, a cruel version of incomplete metamorphosis. The Cumaean Sybil was probably the most important female oracle of antiquity, and she was granted immortality by Apollo. Nevertheless, because she forgot to ask also for perpetual youth, her body irreversibly shrank. Petronius' recollection of the Sybil was to be used by Eliot as an exergue for "The Waste Land": "Nam Sibyllam quidem Cumis ego ipse oculis meis vidi in ampulla pendere, et cum illi pueri dicerent Σίβυλλα τί θέλεις; (Sybilla, ti théleis?) respondebat illa: ἀποθανεῖν θέλω (apothanéin thélo),"⁷⁸ ["I have seen with my own eyes the Sibyl hanging in a jar, and when the boys asked her 'what do you want?' she answered, 'I want to die' "].

After Borges and his repentant immortals, the Sybil's will for death no longer appears simply as the classical retribution for human ὕβρις (*hýbris*), or arrogance towards the gods, but it also expresses the ultimate senselessness of the strife to transcend the most valuable feature of the human condition, namely its temporariness. Since at least Plato, because of this temporariness, humans and their practices had to endure being construed as defective and inferior to various ideal models, from ideas to god and logic. Nietzschean genealogical explorations heralded the return in view of human practices, after their long metaphysical translation into the language of being and its hyperboles: identity, eternity, objectivity. Genealogy joyously announces the renewed openness of history and life, and its endowment with the precious gift of mortality.

7 "A Strange case of non-penetration:" Michel Foucault and Walter Benjamin

In the previous sections, we have explored a constellation of ideas that emerged in the work of several writers and theorists who, in the footsteps of Nietzsche, rejected historicism's objectification of the past and attempted to restore history's openness and critical relevance. These alternative approaches converged in

⁷⁸ Petronius, *Satyricon* 48.

Croce's idea that "all history is contemporary history," as the image of the past is continuously shaped and recreated in the present, while the present is simultaneously announced and directed by the past. In the next sections, we will add the ideas of two other authors to this already considerable constellation: Foucault and Benjamin. Like the authors discussed above, both emphasize the openness of history. Thus, radicalizing Nietzsche's genealogical approach Foucault seeks to restore history's openness by re-imagining it as being devoid of metaphysical essences and constants, while Benjamin argues that the past can be renewed and even "saved" in the present.

In an interview conducted by Gérard Raulet in 1983, Foucault attests to his affinity with the early Frankfurt school, to which Benjamin belonged. He begins by observing that although in the 1930s several Frankfurt school members (including Benjamin) took refuge to Paris, no understanding was established between them and French philosophy. He suggests that this explains the lack of interest in the Frankfurt school in France which continued after the war: "when I was a student, I can assure you that I never once heard the name of the Frankfurt school mentioned by any of my professors." Comparing his own approach to that of the Frankfurt school, Foucault concludes that "it is a strange case of non-penetration between two very similar types of thinking which is explained, perhaps, by that very similarity. Nothing hides the fact of a problem in common better than two similar ways of approaching it."⁷⁹

In the next sections, we will examine whether Foucault is right in emphasizing the intellectual affinity between his own work and that of the early Frankfurt school. More specifically, we will compare Foucault's genealogical method, as developed in an early essay entitled "Nietzsche, Genealogy, History" (1971), with Benjamin's method of historical critique, as developed in his *Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928) and his later writings on history, in particular, his essay "On the Concept of History" (1940).⁸⁰ In doing so, we will explore to what extent their methods are, indeed, comparable, and whether, combined, they can be considered constitutive elements of an alternative approach to history that is more open and relevant to our critical engagements in the present.

⁷⁹ Gerard Raulet, "Critical Theory and Intellectual History. An Interview with Michel Foucault" in *Critique and Power: Recasting the Foucault/Habermas Debate*, ed. Michael Kelly (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998), 117.

⁸⁰ Walter Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, introd. George Steiner, trans. John Osborne (London: Verso, 2003 [1928]); Benjamin, "On the Concept of History."

8 Foucault's genealogical approach

Although Foucault already briefly touched on the question of genealogy in his 1970 inaugural lecture at the *Collège de France*,⁸¹ he sets out to develop his genealogical method in the essay entitled “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History” published a year later. Here, Foucault opposes genealogy to “historicism,” a method that seeks to understand the past “as it actually occurred.” On Foucault’s view, historicism remains bound to the Hegelian (and ultimately Christian) idea of universal history, in which man slowly but gradually progresses towards a more complete self-understanding. This teleological approach to history emphasizes the historical continuities, that is, the ways in which present identities emerge from their “origins,” which are believed to have already contained their essential characteristics, albeit in a primitive and undeveloped form.

By contrast, on Foucault’s view, genealogy breaks away from the historicist obsession with universal history and indefinite teleologies. Its aim is to record the past not as a temporary phase in a continuous development, but as a “singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality” (*NGH*, 369). Following Nietzsche, Foucault believes that this requires, first of all, a critique of the notion of the “origin.” Instead of understanding the past as “origin,” the genealogist discovers that it consists of a “multiplicity of beginnings.” Each of these beginnings already refers to something else, other beginnings to which it is not identical and cannot be reduced. From this perspective, there is no continuity in history, no gradually evolving self-identity or “essence” that relates the present to the past. Instead, the genealogist “finds that there is ‘something altogether different’ behind things, not a timeless and essential secret but the secret that they have no essence, or that their essence was fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms” (*NGH*, 371).

Among the examples Foucault gives is the concept of liberty. Historicists tend to depict human history as an ongoing struggle for liberty, in which man realizes his “essence” by taking responsibility for his existence and determining his life freely. In the field of law, the history of liberty is believed to correspond to the development of the notions of “natural” or “human rights,” which are considered preconditions for human freedom and self-determination. By contrast, Foucault argues that the history of these concepts must not be misunderstood as the history of timeless essences, but rather as the history of multiple beginnings, in which these “essences” are themselves historically produced. Thus, genealogical analysis shows that the concept of liberty “is an ‘invention of the ruling classes’

⁸¹ Hubert L. Dreyfus and Paul Rabinow, *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 105.

and not fundamental to man's nature or at the root of his attachment to being or truth" (NGH, 371). It shows that legal concepts such as "natural" or "human rights" emerged from struggles that led to the imposition of ever new forms of domination, instead of realizing man's timeless "essence" to lead a free and responsible life.

Indeed, from the perspective of genealogy, the emphasis is not on timeless and pre-existing essences, but on the *fabrication* of these "essences," *i.e.*, the contingent formation of discourses of truth. In this context, Foucault – again taking his cue from Nietzsche – argues that the object of genealogy is not a static and timeless "origin [*Ursprung*]," but a dynamic and historical "emergence [*Entstehung*]" (NGH, 373). As he points out, discourses of truth are always formed in a particular state of forces – they *emerge* from the "hazardous play of dominations" (NGH, 378). Like history itself, this struggle for domination is without purpose and without end. Hence, Foucault writes, "[h]umanity does not gradually progress from combat to combat until it arrives at universal reciprocity, where the rule of law finally replaces warfare; humanity installs each of its violences in a system of rules and thus proceeds from domination to domination" (NGH, 378). This implies that legal rules, institutions and practices are the result of temporary distributions of power, and that their meanings are never stable, but continuously colonized and inverted. "The rules," Foucault observes, "are empty in themselves" and they can be "bent to any purpose" by those "capable of seizing these rules" and "invert[ing] their meaning" (NGH, 378).

Crucially, for Foucault, genealogy unmasks existing identities where they appear to be most natural. Indeed, it *historicizes* their very "naturalness" by showing that they are neither timeless, nor essential. Genealogy thus seeks history itself and the singularity of events in "the most unpromising places, in what we tend to feel is without history – in sentiments, love, conscience, instincts" (NGH, 369). It attaches itself especially to those aspects of human existence that are considered to be timeless and natural, and, in particular, the human body: "We believe [. . .] that the body obeys the exclusive laws of physiology, and that it escapes the influence of history, but this [. . .] is false. The body is moulded by a great many distinct regimes; it is broken down by the rhythms of work, rest, and holidays; it is poisoned by food or values, through eating habits or moral laws; it constructs resistances" (NGH, 380). Hence, the task of genealogy is to demonstrate that the body, instead of being naturally given, is itself the product of history – it is the product of a historical struggle for domination that determines our bodily practices, as well as our notion of the body as being "timeless" and "natural."

It is here that the method of genealogy has a value as critique. For it is the seeming "naturalness" of present identities – and of the body as their supposedly

natural substratum – that gives them an appearance of necessity. Their naturalness suggests that the past continues secretly to animate the present, and that the present order of things is not merely historical and contingent, but predetermined. However, by tracing existing identities to their historical “beginnings,” they are recognized as the temporary effect of power, rather than the timeless expression of nature, which deprives them of their appearance of necessity. This is what Foucault – again quoting Nietzsche – calls “effective history [*wirkliche Geschichte*]:” “‘Effective history’ differs from the history of historians in being without constants. Nothing in man – not even his body – is sufficiently stable to serve as the basis for self-recognition or for understanding other men” (*NGH*, 380). By depriving the self of the reassuring stability of nature, effective history creates room for new ways of relating to the self and others. It is critical in robbing existing identities of their appearance of necessity, thereby making possible the experimentation with other identities and forms of (self)recognition.

But what practical form does “effective history” take? Foucault distinguishes three *uses* of history that oppose the naturalistic conception of the past. The first is “parodic:” it refuses the identification of the present with supposedly solid identities of the past, and, instead, uses history in a parodic fashion to disturb existing identities and experiment with the “excessive choice of identities” offered by the past. History is thus approached as a “masquerade,” a “great carnival of time,” in which subsequent identities are perceived as masks that lack a stable point of reference (*NGH*, 386). The second use of history is “dissociative” and consists of the systematic dissociation of our identities by tracing them to a “complex system of distinct and multiple elements, unable to be mastered by the powers of synthesis” (*NGH*, 386). Instead of discovering the “origins” of our identity, it exposes its “multiple beginnings,” by which the self is historically displaced and dissociated. The third is “sacrificial,” in that it turns against the subject of knowledge by demonstrating that the historian’s “will to knowledge” is itself an effect of power, as it is produced in a struggle for domination. Indeed, it is through disciplinary regimes that we become able to recognize and interpret the image of history in the first place.

Most importantly, according to Foucault, genealogy does not consider the past from the perspective of memory or reminiscence by which the present recognizes itself in the past. Instead, it seeks to construct a “counter-memory” that transforms history into a “totally different form of time” (*NGH*, 385). By tracing existing identities to their often contradictory beginnings, and by recognizing them as empty syntheses, it liberates a profusion of seemingly lost events. Indeed, as Foucault explains at the beginning of his text, genealogy approaches these events especially “at the moment when they remained unrealized” (*NGH*, 368). History is thus not predetermined by natural forces – it is neither dictated by the

“exclusive laws of physiology,” nor by man’s supposedly “natural” inclination to liberty. Instead, it consists of a series of unrealized possibilities, of alternative trajectories, missed opportunities, and lost battles. It is by reviving these subjugated knowledges of the past that other identities, other practices of relating to the body and self, become possible.

9 Benjamin’s concept of history

Like Foucault, Benjamin believes it is through a critical reconstruction of the past that we become capable of perceiving the possibilities inherent in the present. Benjamin, like Foucault, criticizes the historicist and Hegelian accounts of history that represent the past as part of a historical continuum, which is recognized as “progress.” These accounts tend to depict the violence and suffering of the past as a necessary and meaningful episode of humanity’s march towards civilization. However, according to Benjamin, such teleological reconstructions of the past are, in fact, subjective expressions of an ideological struggle, a “triumphal procession in which current rulers step over those who are lying prostrate.”⁸² Hence, like Foucault, Benjamin considers the prevailing conceptions of the past a product of the struggle for domination – they are produced to support and legitimize the existing order. This means that to criticize the status quo effectively, an alternative approach to history must be developed.

Strikingly, like Foucault, Benjamin, in his *Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1928), begins his critique of the prevailing conceptions of history with a critique of the notion of the “origin.” Represented as “origin,” the image of the past is at risk of being abused for ideological purposes: it serves to support the existing state of affairs by relating it to its historical antecedents – “origins” – in a seamless continuity that does not allow for any interruptions, let alone revolutionary change. However, unlike Foucault, Benjamin does not reject the notion of the “origin” as such, but limits himself to criticizing its historicist and Hegelian interpretations: “[o]rigin,” he notes, “although an entirely historical category, has, nevertheless, nothing to do with genesis. The term origin is not intended to describe the process by which the existent came into being, but rather to describe that which emerges from the process of becoming and disappearance. Origin is an eddy in the stream of becoming, and in its current it swallows the material involved in the process of genesis.”⁸³

82 Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” thesis 7, 391.

83 Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 45.

Benjamin's notion of the origin as an "eddy in the stream of becoming" refers to a conception of history that is essentially discontinuous and open-ended – indeed, the origin is regarded as the very principle that brings together historical continuity and discontinuity, singularity and repetition, restoration and inconclusiveness. As Beatrice Hanssen explains in her illuminating study *Walter Benjamin's Other History*, the philosophical significance of Benjamin's theory of the origin is that it "articulates an attempt to overcome the dualism between historical contingency and the ahistorical, transcendent Ideas."⁸⁴ He does so by seeking to merge these transcendent Ideas with what is traditionally believed to fall outside their scope: contingency, singularity, transience, and alterity of history. Benjamin's reformulation of the term origin is thus directed against both the historicist obsession with "objective facts" and the Hegelian preoccupation with "relations of essences." Instead, according to Benjamin, the origin emerges where singularity and repetition are perceived as being "conditioned by one another in all essentials."⁸⁵

As Hanssen points out, Benjamin's redefinition of the term "origin" is not only aimed against historicism and Hegelianism, but also against the Nietzschean reading of history. What Benjamin aspires to accomplish by redefining the term origin is precisely to move beyond the Nietzschean theory of eternal repetition, which he regards as a manifestation of mythical power in history.⁸⁶ Thus, contrary to Nietzsche and later Foucault, Benjamin rejects the notion that history is but the stage of an "endlessly repeated play of dominations" – a will to power that produces historical knowledge itself. Instead, on Benjamin's understanding, history is more radically open, the realm not only of what has been, but also of what has remained inconclusive, so that an escape from the "endlessly repeated play of dominations" remains possible. Here, a theological undercurrent of Benjamin's theory surfaces, which sets him apart from both Nietzsche and Foucault. Ultimately, Benjamin believes, the notion of the origin refers to nothing less than a divine Origin. Indeed, as Benjamin suggests, it is by articulating the "originary" structure of historical "facts" that the past might be "saved" and "redemption" announces itself.⁸⁷

Benjamin's understanding of the past as origin leads him to develop the notion of "natural history."⁸⁸ Strikingly, just like Foucault, Benjamin argues that

⁸⁴ Beatrice Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 25.

⁸⁵ Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 46.

⁸⁶ Hanssen, *Walter Benjamin's Other History*, 42.

⁸⁷ Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 46.

⁸⁸ Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 47.

history should be approached where it appears to be most natural, and, conversely, nature where it turns out to be most historical.⁸⁹ It is precisely in those aspects of human existence that seem to be natural and timeless, that the historian discovers the workings of time and historical decay. This is true, in particular, of the body. Like Foucault, Benjamin points out that *the body is inscribed by history*. While Foucault characterized the body somewhat dramatically as “the surface of the inscription of events,” and a “volume in perpetual disintegration” (NGH, 375), Benjamin interprets the German *Trauerspiel* as a staging of this drama: focusing on the body of the sovereign, he observes that the sovereign, suffering from a contradiction between her immense powers and limited human capacities, falls prey to “changing physical impulses” and a “shifting emotional storm,” which cause her identity to gradually disintegrate.⁹⁰ It is, indeed, at the very moment that her authority appears to be most absolute and natural, that it turns out to be most historical and transient, so that she ultimately “falls [. . .] in the name of mankind and history.”⁹¹

In his later writings, Benjamin criticizes historicism explicitly for legitimizing existing forms of domination. Historicism claims to understand the past “as it actually occurred.” This requires that the historicist blots out everything she knows about the later course of history and projects herself into the past – she must *sympathize* with the past and understand it from within its own horizon. However, as Benjamin argues, this method fails to produce a neutral and objective image of the past: “With whom does historicism actually sympathize? The answer is inevitable: with the victor. And all the rulers are the heirs of prior conquerors. Hence, empathizing with the victor invariably benefits the current rulers.”⁹² According to Benjamin, historicism emphasizes the historical continuities that connect present and past, and depicts the current rulers as inheritors of an uninterrupted tradition. Historicism is thus inevitably apologetic. By seeking to establish a historical continuity that does not allow for any real change, it contributes to legitimizing existing forms of domination – it justifies the current rulers in light of their past victories. Conversely, it has little or no regard for those

⁸⁹ In an early essay, Theodor Adorno summarizes Benjamin’s idea of “natural history” as consisting of the attempt to “understand historical being in its utmost historical determinedness, there where it is most historical, as a natural being, or, if possible, [to understand] nature there, where it apparently persists at its deepest, as a historical being.” Theodor W. Adorno, “Die Idee der Naturgeschichte” in *Gesammelte Schriften, vol. 1: Philosophische Frühschriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1990), 354.

⁹⁰ Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 71.

⁹¹ Benjamin, *Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 72.

⁹² Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” thesis 7, 391.

who suffered to make these victories possible, the nameless who lost their battles and found themselves on the wrong side of history.

To avoid historicism's apologetic tendencies, Benjamin proposes to focus not on history's continuities but on its discontinuities. His critical method – which Benjamin calls “historical materialism”⁹³ – orients itself towards those instances of the past that the historicist disregards as deviations: “what for others are deviations are, for me, the data which determine my course. – On the differentials of time (which, for others, disturb the main lines of the inquiry), I base my reckoning.”⁹⁴ On Benjamin's view, the true image of the past is constructed from the “ruins,” the “failures,” and “waste” of the past. Here, Benjamin's critical method is, indeed, strikingly similar to Foucault's genealogy. Like Benjamin, Foucault had argued that, instead of revealing how the past “continues secretly to animate the present,” the genealogist had to “identify the accidents, the minute deviations – or conversely, the complete reversals – the errors, the false appraisals, and faulty calculations” (*NGH*, 374). Both Benjamin and Foucault focus on history's “deviations,” and both consider its discontinuities more significant than its continuities, if only because they contradict the ideological uses of the past that characterize the prevailing conceptions of history.

However, according to Benjamin, the historical materialist must be aware that the image of the past, as it is constructed and interpreted in the present, is inevitably implicated in certain configurations of power. For him, this cannot be an excuse to *use* the past in an ideological way. Instead, she has a responsibility towards the past – in re-constructing the past she must be *responsive* to the claims of past generations. Indeed, as Benjamin observes, “there is a secret agreement

⁹³ Benjamin's use of the term “historical materialism” differs from orthodox Marxist interpretations, in that he does not recognize a direct “causal connection [*Kausalzusammenhang*]” between, on the one hand, the historical development of political, social and cultural institutions, and, on the other, the underlying struggles over the material necessities of life and the ownership of means of production, but only an indirect “thread of expression [*Ausdruckszusammenhang*].” Moreover, he explicitly rejects the belief in progress to which many Marxist interpretations of historical materialism (including arguably that of Marx himself) testify, *i.e.*, the belief that political struggles over material necessities will lead to a classless society. See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 459–460, note N1a, 6; Walter Benjamin, “Paralipomena to ‘On the Concept of History’” in *Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938–1940*, 402–403, thesis 17a.

⁹⁴ Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, N1, 2, 456.

between past generations and the present one,”⁹⁵ according to which the latter, instead of recreating the past in its own image, is obliged to respond to the claims of the former. The task of the historical materialist is thus to *actualize* [aktualisieren] the claims of the past and to give them a new life and significance in the present. This implies that the image of the past is not merely an effect of power. Here, Benjamin’s approach to history differs from Nietzsche and Foucault’s: whereas the latter reject the possibility of a true image of the past, which they consider a strategic ploy in an ongoing struggle for power (from which there is no escape, even though it might have “productive effects”), Benjamin believes that the historical materialist can indeed grasp the “true image of the past” by being responsive to the claims of past generations. This image is disruptive of the present, yet it refuses to be abused for ideological purposes.

This capacity to grasp the true image of the past causes Benjamin to attribute to the historical materialist a “*weak* messianic power”⁹⁶: by reviving the claims of the past, the historical materialist can seek to accomplish now what before was ignored and remained unaccomplished. She can realize these claims in a different historical context with new possibilities.⁹⁷ In doing so, she testifies to a conception of history that is radically open, a realm not only of what has been, but of what remains inconclusive – a history, not of necessity, but of possibility. In this sense, Benjamin suggests, the historical materialist can even *modify* history: she can turn a past that seemed complete (*i.e.*, the suffering of past generations) into something that remains incomplete (*i.e.*, a suffering that can still be redeemed).⁹⁸ Indeed, what Benjamin suggests, is that the historical materialist must present the past in the light of its possible redemption. Of course, she cannot redeem the past herself, but she can show it in a way that its redemption is revealed as being both urgent and possible. This requires that, in construing the image of the past, she responds to the claims of past generations, to their silent call for redemption, and seeks to make good their suffering. In doing so, she bears witness to a notion of redemption, for which no instant of history can be considered lost.

95 Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” thesis 2, 390.

96 Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” thesis 2, 390.

97 See Stéphane Mosès, “Eingedenken und Jetztzeit: Geschichtliches Bewusstsein im Spätwerk Walter Benjamins” in *Memoria: Vergessen und Erinnern*, eds. Anselm Haverkamp and Renate Lachmann (München: Fink, 1993), 389.

98 Benjamin, *Arcades Project*, N8, 1, 471.

10 “The true image of the past:” Foucault and Benjamin

Was Foucault right when he characterized his relation to the early Frankfurt school as “a strange case of non-penetration between two very similar types of thinking,” and suggested that they had not only addressed a “common problem” but also developed “similar ways of approaching it”? If we compare Foucault’s genealogical method to Benjamin’s method of historical critique, the resemblances are, indeed, striking. Both seek to unmask the prevailing conceptions of history as ideological impositions in an ongoing struggle for domination. By emphasizing the historical continuities that relate the present to the past, these conceptions contribute to legitimizing the existing order by giving it a false appearance of necessity. By contrast, both Benjamin and Foucault seek to record the singularity of the past outside of these apologetic continuities. In doing so, they concentrate on historical moments that remain unrealized in the present, emphasizing the discontinuities, deviations, and unfulfilled promises of the past. By revealing the past as a realm of possibility, they contribute to creating a space for alternative ways of relating to the self and others. Thus, for both, it is by re-imagining the past that we become capable of criticizing the existing order and perceiving the possibilities inherent in the present.

Strikingly, both Benjamin and Foucault believe that a critique of the dominant conceptions of history requires a redefinition of the notion of the “origin.” While Foucault replaces the “origin” with a “multiplicity of beginnings,” each of which could have led to different historical trajectories, Benjamin redefines it as a principle that brings together singularity and repetition, restoration and inconclusiveness. In doing so, both seek to re-conceptualize history as a realm, not of necessity, but of possibility. More importantly, both adopt a similar notion of “natural history” that reveals nature to be historical and transient. Focusing on the (human) body, they show that it is subject to time and historical decay, so that nothing in human beings, not even their bodies, can serve as a stable basis for (self-)recognition. By *historicizing* the body and depriving the self of the reassuring stability of nature they reveal the self to be an empty synthesis, a historical practice that can, and indeed must, be changed. Finally, both authors concentrate on subjugated knowledges of the past that can suddenly revive to disrupt the existing order. In focusing on these “counter-memories” they seek to prepare the way for a radical critique of the present.

However, notwithstanding these similarities, there is at least one important difference between Foucault’s genealogy and Benjamin’s method of historical critique. While Foucault understands the revival of subjugated knowledges of the

past as part of an ongoing struggle for domination, so that even his genealogy must be considered an effect of power, Benjamin believes that there is a “true image of the past,” which the historical materialist can “grasp.” This image of the past is not a mere effect of power, but “true,” in the sense of temporarily escaping the struggle for domination. More importantly, Benjamin attributes to the historian a “weak messianic power:” by renewing the claims of past generations – claims that were ignored or suppressed in the course of history – she can *modify* history and seek to accomplish now what before was ignored or remained unaccomplished. Thus, unlike Foucault’s genealogist, who seeks to banish all “essentials” from the past and unmask history itself as an “endlessly repeated play of dominations,” Benjamin’s historical materialist, in re-constructing the past, remains bound by a *theological* vision: she has a messianic responsibility to re-present the “true image of the past” that does justice to claims of past generations, to their silent call for redemption.

11 Conclusion

We began our essay by explaining how Nietzsche turned against the new “scientific” history of his day, which betrayed a belief in the objective “out-there-ness” of the past. In Nietzsche’s view, the past, far from being objectively “out there” to be discovered by the historian, was constantly reorganized in the present. Indeed, the historian’s capacity to interpret historical occurrences and turn them into a meaningful narrative depended on a will to transform the present itself. Hence, the supposed objectivity of historical knowledge, on which the scientific historian prided himself, was not merely a deplorable illusion, but a cunning strategy to immunize the past from alternative interpretations. It was a strategy of domination, in which certain interpretations of the past were endowed with the aura of objectivity, while others were delegitimized as myth. For Nietzsche, on the other hand, the image of the past had to be informed by a vision of the future. The historian’s capacity to trace historical transformations had to be considered the effect of his will to produce further transformations – an effect, that is, of the will to power.

Following in Nietzsche’s footsteps other writers and theorists soon attempted to reconceptualise the relation between past and present. Rediscovering the formative power of the present, Croce claimed that “all history is contemporary history”⁹⁹ and, in a similar vein, Eliot argued that “the past should be altered by

⁹⁹ Croce, *La Storia come Pensiero*, 5.

the present as much as the present is directed by the past.”¹⁰⁰ Emphasizing the ways in which the past originated from the present, Péguy attempted to reverse the chronological order, and he followed Bergson in arguing that the past appeared to announce the present only because it was reshaped by the present itself: hence, it was the past that actually repeated the present. The purpose of this reversed repetition was, once again, to remind us of our constant intervention upon the past. Finally, Borges suggested that the present created its own predecessors; indeed, each present led to a reorganization of history, as the past only became meaningful – and, indeed, *historical* – in relation to a particular present. Together the ideas of these authors formed a constellation that pointed to a shared conviction: that the past was not objectively given, but actively construed in the present.

In the long sixties, Nietzsche’s philosophical heir Foucault aspired to a more open and critical concept of history by re-imagining it as being devoid of metaphysical essences and constants. Like his predecessors he was aware that the critique of “scientific” history required a radical reconceptualization of the present’s relation to the past. Instead of regarding the past as “origin” of the present, it had to be considered a “multiplicity of beginnings,” each of which pointed to alternative directions, other histories that had remained unrealized. Indeed, as Foucault showed, the very constants and essences that were believed to connect the present to the past were themselves historically produced. Even the body, the supposedly natural substratum of the self, was recognized as the contingent product of history, rather than nature, as it was showed to be “moulded by a great many distinct regimes.”¹⁰¹ By denying the self the reassuring stability of nature, indeed, of any constants or essences, Foucault tried to develop an understanding of history that contributed to creating a space for alternative identities, new ways of relating to the self and others.

Like Foucault and his predecessors, Benjamin criticized scientific history for its belief in the objective “out-there-ness” of the past, which he too recognized as an attempt to immunize the past from alternative interpretations. On his view, scientific history supported existing forms of domination by emphasizing historical continuities that gave them a false appearance of necessity. Turning against scientific history’s objectification of the past and the sense of inevitability it entailed, Benjamin argued that the historian had to actively recreate the past. On his view, the historian’s task was not to discover the past “as it had actually occurred,” but to *modify* it, to turn a past which scientific history had declared to

100 Eliot, “Tradition and the Individual Talent,” 50.

101 Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History,” 380.

be complete into something incomplete and undetermined. It was this belief in the possible modification of the past that caused Benjamin to attribute to the historian a “weak messianic power:”¹⁰² by reviving the hopes of past generations the historian could accomplish now what before had remained unaccomplished. She could “save” the past by giving it a new life and significance in the present.

Like his predecessors, Benjamin acknowledged the perspective of the present as organizer of the rendering of the past. Moreover, Benjamin suggested that each present did not simply *appear* to be anticipated by the past, but was actually *announced* by this very past. He thus referred to a “secret agreement between past generations and the present one,” by which “our coming was expected on earth.”¹⁰³ Benjamin’s stance could be interpreted as a radicalization, as well as a further reversal of Péguy’s reversed repetition. However, in contrast to his predecessors, Benjamin understood this change of perspective in explicitly religious terms: as the past was actively recreated and modified in the present, the historian had a messianic responsibility towards past generations: she had to construct a “true image of the past” that did justice to their memory. Here Benjamin parted company with his precursors, and in particular Nietzsche, and the genealogists to come, such as Foucault: in his view, the “true image of the past” was not merely a strategic device in an ongoing struggle for domination, but it was founded upon the historian’s responsibility to do justice to the past. This image was informed by a trans-historical solidarity among the generations that prevented the historian from reducing the past to a mere instrument of power, even while acknowledging that, in a political sense, it could not be neutral or insignificant.

And yet, despite their various political stances, it is likely that the authors we recalled, from Nietzsche to Foucault, would have subscribed to Benjamin’s refusal to project his contemporary relations of domination not only into the past, but also into the future. Their different theoretical allegiances notwithstanding, all these theorists would have agreed that both the past and the future are not completely determined. We owe them this double opening, which also invites us to engage there where both our past and our future can take shape: in our present.

102 Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” thesis 2, 390.

103 Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” thesis 2, 390.

